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AUTHOR Snodgrass, Mary Ellen
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ABSTRACT

English teachers who want to change professions have many skills that can be put to good use outside the classroom--a person who can operate a successful English classroom can tackle any job in the market. An objective look at teaching will yield an impressive list of teachers' competencies and capabilities, especially people skills, such as diplomacy, counseling, organizing, writing, interviewing, and communicating. In addition, managerial, research, and analysis skills are part of a teacher's talents. Many times personnel services maintain antiquated notions that English teachers are fussy pedantics, purists, or high-priced nannies. For teachers interested in changing careers, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills offers a list of articles with specific suggestions about where and how to look for jobs. Several self-help books offer case studies and practical advice on alternative careers. A job seeker should begin with an intriguing resume that reflects the needs of the marketplace, and a list of intelligent questions about each potential position. There are both pluses (such as a return to dreams abandoned in college) and minuses (such as shorter vacations) for teachers who have found second careers. The most important thing to keep in mind is that English teachers have the ability to succeed in any type of profession. (NKA)

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Moving Up or Moving On
or
If I Love You Am I Trapped Forever?

Mary Ellen Snodgrass

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Moving Up or Moving On

or

If I Love You Am I Trapped Forever?

Once I invited an attorney to speak to my Latin II class on the legal ramifications of the Magna Carta. He arrived about three minutes before the end of second period, a basic English III class, and observed me while I ended one class, performed my assigned hall duty, and began Latin II. At the end of his speech, he escorted me down the hall toward my office, marveling at all the minuscule tasks that can confront one teacher in about eight minutes' time.

He noted that I had lassoed an absentee for a makeup test and another miscreant who had been avoiding homework, dug a bandaid from a jumbled drawer and applied it to a student's paper cut, separated two ninth graders who were tussling in the hall, encouraged a colleague who was directing students in a reenactment of the witches' scene from Macbeth, directed traffic at a busy corner, settled my next class, greeted everybody with an appropriate kind word, introduced him, and sat attentively through his presentation, keeping a roving glance on the reactions of all my students.

That day was a landmark in my twenty-year career. My guest speaker was impressed by the steady flow of demands in a teacher's daily schedule: according to him, it is as demanding as trial law. I think I truly shocked him when I assured him that there was nothing unusual about that particular eight-minute segment. He insisted that there is a talent for being able to do five things at once, but neither of us could give it a name.

Since that day, I have often thought about the comments of that astute outsider who saw teaching for the complex profession that it has become, or maybe has always been. I contrasted that experience with the timidity and fear I have seen on many veteran teachers' faces when they think out loud about the possibility of changing jobs. For people who daily succeed at a dizzying array of responsibilities, expectations, and

disciplines, no job can compare to the demands of teaching school, particularly English.

I made my own getaway after the months of subconscious dickering percolated into my conscious thinking one morning at 8:15 the first week in March, 1985. There was no turning back at that point--I said my farewells at the administrative building, collected my worldly goods, and quit. At that point, I could not have gone on, even if some inner wisdom had gained control and changed my thinking. I was one of the fortunate ones. I had a husband who made a good living. I did not have to take the first job that I could find. I had choices. I had the luxury of time.

I have given much thought to fellow teachers who have left and are preparing to leave the profession. Since March, 1985, I have attended every NCTE fall and spring convention as well as national IRA conventions. Everywhere I go to exhibit the books and materials I have written, I talk with teachers, I listen to their hopes and fears, and I look into their faces. It's amazing how much alike they--we--are.

We all bear the brunt of current political movements--accountability, teacher preparedness, competency, career ladder, basic skills, standardized testing, censorship. Many of us, remembering the sweet days two decades ago when the humanities were enjoying a revival, feel displaced, threatened, unappreciated in today's market. The values are all wrong; somehow, caring for students as people and wishing to pass along to them the achievements of our civilization are inappropriate goals in today's classrooms where behavior modification and lockstep systems of lesson-planning determine who gets the gold stars.

I have not come to lament the past, but to bring the good news. A person who can operate a successful English classroom can tackle any job in the market. If you extract yourself from the situation and look at teaching with an objective eye, you will discover an impressive list of competencies and capabilities--people skills, such as diplomacy, counseling, organizing and managing groups of varying sizes and abilities,

questioning, interviewing, writing, summarizing, communicating. No one exceeds the English teacher at initiating ideas, motivating, evaluating, marketing. A person who can make introductory adverb clauses seem provocative or topic outlines inspirational can sell anything.

In addition, there are managerial skills, including prioritizing, budget-making, inventory control, supervision, departmental planning, operating complicated machinery, and meeting intricate time schedules. In terms of individualized skills, English teachers are tops at research, analysis, lay-out and presentation, advertising. The only skills not on this list are the specific types of know-how that everyone has to learn at a new job.

When I consider my colleagues, I see no paucity of personal strengths: teachers are lifelong learners. We possess perseverance, judgment, concentration, dependability, understanding, logic, patience. We have no lack of persuasion, resourcefulness, confidence. We excel at good grooming, leadership, optimism, citizenship. We are known for our ambition, competitive drive, self-discipline. Our community respects us for our cultivation, knowledge, commitment, idealism, creativity, divergent and critical thinking, and our broad range of experience. A veteran of several seasons with school drama productions is no average flunky. Anyone who can chaperone the school newspaper staff to Columbia Scholastic Press workshops and return unscathed could chair any board.

I must warn you of the doubters, the people in our society who don't place a high value on our better qualities. I was personally astounded at the ignorance of personnel managers, employment services, and "headhunters" who maintain the antiquated notion that English teachers are fussy pedantics, purists, or high-priced nannies. One interviewer for a fiber optics firm told me that my background was great except for my lack of dealings with the general public. I was so appalled that I made no reply. That man is beyond help.

Let me offer you three positive stimuli if you are sincerely interested

in changing careers. ERIC, NCTE's clearinghouse on reading and communication skills, offers a respectable list of articles with specific suggestions about where and how to look for other jobs. A delightful book to help you with the technical end of sizing up the job market and finding your niche is Richard Nelson Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute?* On the philosophical and emotional side of launching a career, I recommend Gail Sheehy's *Pathfinders*, a sequel to *Passages*, which offers sensitive case studies, practical advice, and a view of long-range goals that will shake you free of your present situation and thrust you on the way to attainable career objectives.

I suggest that you form a sensible plan of action. Read up on occupations from a current dictionary of job titles, scout the trade journals, learn the lingo, apply for a summer job as a temporary so that you can size up your local options from inside the operation rather than from a sofa in the personnel manager's office. Get hopping on personal contacts. If people know you are available, you stand a better chance of getting offers. Avail yourself of the network--call in favors, buttonhole relatives, neighbors, and friends who have influence and knowledge of the job market.

Most important of all, take Socrates's advice: get to know yourself. Make a list of the ten or twenty things you have done well in your career, that you enjoyed doing, and that you take pride in. Examine every minute skill that you used in those tasks. Don't skip a single job, no matter how humble it may sound--consider the PTA fall festival, the debate team, your part on the accreditation committee, your introduction to computers, the planning and construction of a new school, curriculum outlines, implementation of a new reading program, a writing workshop, anything that required work, manual as well as cerebral.

I warn you ahead of time of two negative mindsets that will interfere with the new you--guilt and false security. You may experience some negative feedback from a strong conscience that tells you "You married

teaching for better or worse, for richer or poorer, till death do you part." In actuality, that could be your fate. Sheehy advises that future pathfinders divest themselves of the notion that they are better off after a sizable number of years if they stick it out until retirement.

After your years of serving everybody else's needs, cultivate a "me first" attitude. How many days do any of us have on this earth? Why should any of those days be spent in misery or the perpetual heartburn of discontent? Is the fear of change so great that any of us would risk the quality of our lives on the security of tenure or the assurance of a pension check? The real values that will provide you with a fulfilling life are self-esteem, enjoyment, variety, challenge, and the satisfaction of time well-spent.

I have known many people who have made the change. So have you. Their successes have come from a variety of skills. Some have not ventured far from their chalktray to careers in administration, supervision, teacher education, libraries, and my own choice, textbook writing and editing. Some have made daring changes--into music, the restaurant business, finance. Some have returned to those dreams that they abandoned in their college years--art, child development, religious work, politics, government, law and law enforcement, city planning, journalism. Others have chosen creative paths, such as crafts, design, display and advertising, media, periodicals, travel planning. Some have stayed close to home with more people-centered jobs, such as personnel management, social work, medical technology. Some have gone for the gold in management, business ownership, sales, mail order, and real estate.

From my association with teachers who have found second careers, I have learned some of the minuses of the change--shorter vacations, longer work days, new expectations, office politics, young supervisors, loss of seniority, risk of failure, emotional turmoil, rejection by old teacher friends who treat ex-teachers like turncoats or expatriates, and the most

painful part of all, missing their students and colleagues.

But, as Ann Landers always advises, these pathfinders have drawn up a counter-list of pluses--being able to dress up for work, dealing with adults, having more flexible blocks of time, receiving recognition and merit raises, working with challenging ideas, escape from petty school bureaucracy, an open-ended career situation, discovering untapped capabilities, feeling like a pioneer, new vitality and a sense of well-being, more time for themselves, being included in decision-making, enjoying a relaxed lunch without lunch duty, and, no small considerations in themselves, going to the bathroom when they want to, and not having yellow fingers or a chalkline across their rumps at the end of the day.

The task before you is frightening and challenging. You will need a short, intriguing resume that reveals your varied skills and experiences and at the same time reflects the needs of the marketplace. Give it a trial run, modify it, add specific accomplishments and responsibilities, such as successful ideas you have implemented, awards you have won, the number of people you have successfully worked with each day. Have your skills in mind so that you can emphasize them and let them speak for themselves.

Also have a list of intelligent questions to ask, such as what does it take to succeed in this position? What are company benefits? What is your rate of turnover? What growth do you foresee in the next five years? What improvements need to be made? What would a typical day entail? What opportunities exist for advancement? Who is in charge? When can I interview with that person?

No field is limited to one skill. Consider every possibility--banking, manufacturing, health care, food and entertainment, real estate, government agencies, private ownership. Assert your knowledge, enthusiasm, and audacity. Fellow English teachers, I believe in you. I have attended conventions with you, shared your committee work, assisted you with bulletin boards and PTA programs, supported your innovations, encouraged you during curriculum upheavals, taught down the hall from

your classroom. I know the quality of your work. You're something special. Go get 'em!

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